

THE ARACHNOID TOURIST

Robert Filman • Lockheed Martin Advanced Technology Center • filman@stc.lockheed.com
Feniosky Peña-Mora • Massachusetts Institute of Technology • feniosky@mit.edu

THE COLLABORATING SPIDER

COLLABORATION RESOURCES

Since this is the collaboration issue, the Spider set out to explore the Web and see what he could find to help him become a better collaborator.

WWW Collaboration Projects •
union.ncsa.uiuc.edu/HyperNews/get/www/collaboration.html

Daniel LaLiberte



Visited 31 March 1997

The stickiest place for collaboration we found was this site at the University of Illinois. Daniel LaLiberte has done us the favor of providing not only a collection of pointers to other collaboration projects, but also the beginnings of a “dimensional” taxonomy of collaboration systems, including axes for synchronous vs. asynchronous, focused vs. free-form, one-way vs. two-way vs. multiway, distributed vs. centralized, persistent vs. ephemeral, private vs. public, moderated vs. unmoderated, and reading vs. writing. This page includes references to both software and papers.

The Tourist likes taxonomies. Organizing the facts of the universe always seems like a more creative endeavor than merely piling on new ones. (Now with the self-publishing style of the Web, the previous storm of new information has turned into a deluge.) We’re particularly fond of taxonomies that recognize more complex structure than simple subclasses—for example, orthogonal dimensions rather than simple trees. So LaLiberte gets extra flies for not merely listing relevant sites but for imposing structure on chaos. It’s also way cool that the resource list is itself a collaborative document, using HyperNews (available by pointer from the site) to encourage discussion. A clever pun, having the demo be about the demo.









CSCW & Groupware •
www.crew.umich.edu/~brinck/cscw.html

Tom Brinck

Visited 22 April 1997



This is another good index of collaboration projects, though with a more academic orientation than LaLiberte’s.

5 Flies = Scrumptious					
4 Flies = Tasty					
3 Flies = Filling					
2 Flies = Edible					
1 Flies = Yuck!					

In contrast to LaLiberte, Brinck emphasizes defining the groupware space, particularly in terms of research papers, groups, and conferences, and places less emphasis on companies and software.

Conferencing on the World Wide Web •
freenet.msp.mn.us/people/drwool/webconf.html

David R. Woolley

Visited 30 March 1997



Discussion group software is ancient technology, dating back two decades to Usenet newsgroup readers and countless forgotten bulletin boards. It’s not surprising that lots of programs exist to sort, order, illustrate, filter, organize, classify, and arrange messages into groups, threads, indices, tables, trees, databases, frames, boards, and so forth. David Woolley lists a lot of them (we hesitate to say “most”), with short descriptions and hyperlinked pointers to programs and reviews.

The Tourist is impressed. We certainly know where to look next time we want to set up a discussion group system (not that we’ve any intention of setting up a discussion group system, mind you, but this is clearly the place to shop). The author also gets additional anatomy (two legs and a wing) for keeping the list up to date—it’s always nice to read pages whose “last update” was today.

COLLABORATIONS

Having seen the software and technology of collaboration, the Tourist decided to check out some actual collaborations. Now deliberate, casual collaboration—adding text to a newsgroup—is old hat. We were looking for things more unusual than that.

Firefly • www.agents-inc.com/
 Bignote • www.bignote.com/
 Visited 30 March 1997



Nicely interactive, but marked down for a confusing interface and bad answers.

The first place we landed, Firefly and Bignote, speak to indirect collaboration. (Agents-inc (Firefly) is the technology that supports a music recommendation (and sales) service, Bignote.) Through the magic of computational statistics, they promise knowledge distilled from mass. More specifically, tell Bignote what you like to listen to, and Bignote will recommend other music, based on the opinions of people who like the same stuff you do.

Well, nice in theory, but it seems to fall down in practice. We found the Bignote site confusing (the “when do you mouse what” problem), compounded by the site’s tendency to crash our (Mac/Netscape) browser. After the Tourist figured out what to do and what not to do, we gave it 20-some-odd opinions on musicians (ranging from “1: hate it” through “4: it’s alright” and on to “7: the best”) and asked for suggestions.

In light of our declared preferences, Bignote provided a list of other musicians along with a numeric expectation of how much it thought we’d like them. We expected it to describe the stuff already in our library, along with a few more obscure things that would be worth trying. But the Tourist found ourselves pretty indifferent to Bignote’s suggestions. Further exploration revealed that Bignote was right on that point, since it predicted that we’d give its proposals dispassionate 4s on the 1–7 scale. So what can we say about a soothsayer that is uncannily accurate about the insignificant? A great triumph of technology, or a waste of electrons? You decide.

Subway Navigator/Indicateur des métros •
metro.jussieu.fr:10001/
 Pierre David
 Visited 29 September 1996



The opposite of unconscious collaboration is deliberate effort, and seeing international cooperation on a grand scheme is always fun. This site displays the “subway/metro guide”—maps and train information for metro services for about 60 cities around the world. Scores of people have contributed data and laboriously plotted maps to the subway project. The system itself is interactive, suggesting routes between stations, mousable maps of subway systems, and, for some cities, calculations of estimated travel times.

It makes a nice demo: Click on points on a map to have a subway route selected. Something on the Net your grandmother can understand and relate to. Of course, she’s sitting in San Francisco, and has only a casual interest in learning the best way to get from Notre Dame to the Eiffel Tower. If we were really in Paris, we’d use the subway wall maps to find our way around—getting an Internet connection from a subway car is notoriously difficult. And

if we wanted to know how long it would take to go from station to station, we wouldn’t trust this system—it’s a database built by random volunteer labor that seems to think subway travel times are constant, day and night.

Technologically, most of the hand-built mechanisms for making choices, searching, and tying graphics to actions have been superseded by newer Web technologies like forms and maps in HTML and Java. It’s sort of a pity, in a way, since it’s clear that a lot of energy and enthusiasm went into making this project work.

The English Server • english-server.hss.cmu.edu/
 Geoffrey Sauer

Visited 9 April 1997



Well, if people can collaborate to make collaborative projects and maps, how about collaboration on a grand scale, like a collaboration to make a library? The English Server at Carnegie Mellon University is a cooperative project that has been publishing humanities texts online since 1990. This library now comprises over 15,000 texts in a variety of disciplines, limited only by the interests of the members of CMU’s English Department. There appears to be some selectivity about which texts get “published,” though the site doesn’t make it particularly obvious what the selection algorithm is.

This site has an eclectic repository of information including topics such as academia, feminism, history, languages, literacy, poetry, rhetoric, links between technology and culture, and even shareware and the weather. It includes two online journals, “Cultronix,” a journal of contemporary art and cultural theory, and “Bad Subjects,” which discusses “current progressive issues.” (Wouldn’t publication there look good on your vitae.)

We liked the way the numerical matching scores on the home page’s search engine have been translated to bar graphs—the computer scientist’s pseudoprecision converted to a more humanistic, visual notation.

But that’s just the top-level search engine. As befits the pluralism of a humanities project, each subcategory off the main page seems to have a different search presentation. It’s a fun site to browse; however, not having any humanities research papers to write this week, we can’t judge how useful the English Server is for actual scholars. ■

About the Tourist

The Arachnoid Tourist scours the Net to find and review Web sites of interest to our readers.

What makes a site interesting? The Tourist appreciates style but cares most about content. Each issue we visit five to 10 sites and report on what we find and how well it works.

We welcome your suggestions for places to visit.